

## **2,000 Missing Mainers**

Catherine Reilly

- published Feb. 19, 2005 in the “Viewpoints” section of the Bangor Daily News

In his February 12 column, Todd Benoit christened a new era in Maine’s history: The End of Children. He was referring to Maine’s loss of seventy thousand elementary and high school students between 1970 and 2010. As Benoit noted, “the number of women of child-bearing age in Maine is at its lowest since 1895, and the ones here aren’t having many babies anyway.”

He’s right. In 2002, Maine’s birth rate was 10.5 live births per 1,000 residents and falling. That birthrate was 25% below the national rate and lower than every other state except Vermont.

Several factors contribute to Maine’s low birthrate. First, Maine’s population is older than other states’. In 2000, the portion of Maine residents age 65 or older (14.4%) was seventh highest in the nation.

Second, many young Mainers leave the state for educational and career opportunities elsewhere. During each year of the 1990’s, Maine lost roughly 3,000 residents age 18 to 29.

Third, Maine lacks minority and immigrant populations, which tend to have higher birthrates. Whereas Maine once was a state of hardworking immigrants eager to start new lives and new families, it is now a mono-racial state of longtime U.S. natives.

The first two factors are frequently discussed around Maine’s policy tables. The third is not.

Maine was once a much more diverse place – even more diverse than the rest of the country is today. In 1910 (when Maine’s birthrate double today’s), one in seven Mainers was born in another country.

The large communities of French-Canadian, Irish, and Scandinavian immigrants who settled in Maine were eager to work hard and build families in an area that offered them more opportunity than places they had left. Today’s immigrants, over 75% of whom are from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, are doing the same thing, just not in Maine.

In 2000, the portion of Maine residents born outside the U.S. was 2.9%, the lowest since 1850 (and perhaps earlier but data are not readily available). By comparison, 11.1% of all U.S. residents are foreign born. In 2000, 96.5% of Maine residents were non-Hispanic white individuals compared to just 69.1% of U.S. residents.

In short, Mainers are a uniquely homogenous group. Homogeneity makes the state a comfortable place for many people but it comes with a price. Each year there are about 2,000 fewer Maine residents due to our lack of diversity. Here’s why.

For a variety of reasons, including the aging of the baby boomers, the birthrate of native-born white Americans is at historically low levels. The presence of non-white populations elsewhere in the nation counters the declining birthrates of white Americans. In 2002, there were 11.7 live births per 1,000 white U.S. residents each year but the birthrate for the nation as a whole was much higher: 13.9.

If you told a group of demographers only Maine's racial composition and asked them to predict our birth rate, without mentioning the age of our population or brain-drain, they would correctly guess that it's much lower than the rest of the country. Maine doesn't have large minority and immigrant populations to counter the naturally declining birthrates of its white residents.

From 2000 to 2002, about 13,640 babies were born in Maine annually. If during those years Maine's racial makeup had been the same as the nation's, that number would have been about 15,500 (author's calculations using data from the Census Bureau and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention). So if our population was as diverse as the nation's, then each year we would gain nearly 2,000 additional Maine residents.

2,000 young new Mainers would greatly reduce the enrollment declines in Maine schools, where attendance dropped by roughly 2,300 students each year from 1998 to 2003.

Recapturing Maine's history as a state of hard working immigrants could help prevent the loss of Maine heritage as our school-age population vanishes. The only difference is most immigrants today are from Latin America, Asia, and Africa rather than Europe.

We often attribute Maine's twin demographic challenges, declining youth and growing elderly, to the aging of the baby boomers and the emigration of young Mainers. The role of population diversity is overlooked. As a state, we need to understand the issue and its potential consequences. Unless we do so, we will futilely lament The End of Children.

*Catherine Reilly is Economic Advisor at the Maine State Planning Office.*